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BY H. L. MENCKEN

The Believing Mind

HOUDINI & CONAN DOYLE, by Bernard M. L. Ernst & Hereward Carrington. $3. 8⅞ x 5⅝; 249 pp. New York: *Albert & Charles Boni.*

MR. ERNST is president of the parent assembly of the Society of American Magicians, and presumably represents Houdini in the combat here reported; Mr. Carrington, who is a well-known writer on table-tapping, slate-writing, thought-reading and other such ghostly marvels, is apparently in Doyle's corner. Just what hand each of them had in the book I do not know, but to me at least it seems to lean toward the transcendental side, despite a somewhat elaborate show of impartiality. Doyle, who was an indefatigable spook-chaser, gets nearly all the breaks. Even when his bovine credulity is exposed in the most patent and painful manner, and on evidence supplied fatuously by himself, he is yet represented to have been a sagacious and even scientific fellow, with no appetite save for the truth. By the same token poor Houdini is patronized rather heavily, and his weaknesses—for example, his vanity—surely get sufficient notice. Nevertheless, it is plain from the chronicle that he had all the better of Doyle, and that there can scarcely be two opinions as to which was the more intelligent.

The relation between the men was a curious one, and it is worth something to have this record of it. They began exchanging letters in 1920, and during the four years following met many times. Doyle, in those days, was busily whooping up spiritualism, and it was his obvious hope to convert Houdini, whose celebrity as a stage magician would have made his conversion a notable victory for the holy cause. But Houdini, though he was always willing and even eager to examine Doyle's "evidence", was never so much as flustered by it. Every time he came to close quarters with it he found that it was full of holes. Most of the tricks of Doyle's mediums he could do himself, and far better than they could; as for the remainder, he saw every reason to believe that they would yield in the same way to a more careful approach. Doyle bombarded him with challenges and persuasions, but he never came into camp. When he died in 1926 he was fully convinced that spiritualism was buncombe. Few men ever had a better opportunity to judge it, or as much competence.

Though, as I have said, Doyle is treated very politely in this book, the fact that he was an almost fabulous ass cannot be concealed. It may sound incredible, but it is a simple fact that he passed to his brummagem Other World in 1930 thoroughly convinced that Houdini himself had been a medium! Houdini, while they were both alive, protested against this nonsense with great earnestness, and offered the most solemn assurance that all of his tricks—getting out of handcuffs, reading minds, staying under water for long periods, and so on—were tricks and nothing more, but Doyle kept on insisting idiotically that some "psychic" power was involved in them. I commend the fact to connoisseurs of human imbecility. It is, in its way, a superb measure of the intel-

lectual dignity of the whole psychical research movement. Doyle was undoubtedly one of its great stars, and maybe it would not be too much to say that he was the greatest of them, yet he continued to believe that Houdini was infested by spooks in the face of the most direct and unanswerable evidence to the contrary. No wonder it was easy for professional mediums to fetch him! And no wonder he seemed a master mind to the dolts who sit trembling in dingy back parlors, listening to the banal chatter of Wah-wah the Indian chief and Little Brighteyes.

Once, at Atlantic City, he undertook to get a message from Houdini's dead mother, with Lady Doyle as the medium. The message turned out to be the usual maudlin stuff—"Oh, my darling, thank God, thank God, at last I'm through! . . . Why, of course, I want to talk to my boy —my own beloved boy", and so on. Houdini was polite, but it must have been hard for him to contain himself, for the whole message was in the ornate spiritualist dialect of English—and his mother, a Hungarian rabbi's widow, had only the most imperfect knowledge of the language, and never used it in speaking to him. When the seance was over he made some idle scratches on a sheet of paper, and presently wrote the name Powell. Thus Doyle described the episode in "Our American Adventure", printed a bit later on:

> Now, Dr. Ellis Powell, my dear fighting partner in spiritualism, had just died in England—worn out, I expect [*sic*], by his own exertions, for he was a desperately hard worker in the cause. I was the man he was most likely to signal to, and here was his name coming through the hand of Houdini. "Truly, Saul is among the prophets," said I.

In brief, another "proof" that Houdini was a medium—and didn't know it. Unfortunately, Houdini himself also left a record of that sitting, and from it we learn that the Powell whose name occurred to him was not Dr. Ellis Powell at all, but one F. E. Powell, a fellow magician, at that moment stranded in Texas! Later on, Doyle protested against this and similar exposures of his fantastic credulity on the ground that he regarded spiritualism as a religion, and that his opponents ought to respect it as such!

This last contention, it seems to me, revealed very neatly the disease which afflicts the whole tribe of spook-chasers. What they suffer from is simply the religious diathesis: they are consumed by an implacable will to believe. It is all one whether the specific object of their belief be spiritualism or the Mosaic cosmogony, Christian Science or chiropractic, astrology or infant damnation: the essential thing is that they believe it as an act of pure faith, and without any regard for the apparent facts. Most such believers, as everyone knows, switch facilely from one tinpot revelation to another. Years ago I called attention to the protean and wholesale credulity of advocates of the Single Tax, then somewhat in fashion. Canvassing a long list of eminent American Single Taxers I found that there was not one among them who did not also believe in some other palpable flubdub. Some were anti-vaccinationists, some were anti-vivisectionists, and others were vegetarians. One was a crusader for osteopathy, and another engaged in umbilicular contemplation. A third was one of the first to hail jazz as a new art form.

Later on many of these brethren went over to Socialism, and became parlor pinks of the vintage of 1912. Others joined the Bull Moose harlequinade or became Prohibitionists. The Socialists have always shown the same colossal capacity for em-

bracing the preposterous. Practically all of their leaders swallowed the Wilson hooey in 1917 and became saviors of democracy, and one of the most distinguished of them subsequently succumbed to Dr. Albert Abrams, the San Francisco Cagliostro. This seer is now an ardent Prohibitionist, and also believes in fasting and in mental telepathy. I have heard of another who is convinced that cancer may be cured by eating raisins and nuts, and of a third who was converted to the Marxian gospel by the Ouija board. Large numbers of them are trusting pacifists, and nearly all are eugenists.

What lies under all this is simply the religious diathesis aforesaid: an irresistible and perhaps pathological impulse to believe and cherish the incredible. One finds it in all truly pious folk, and one finds it also in many who regard themselves with innocent sincerity as agnostics, or even as atheists. For example, I point to the young Communist intellectuals who now make the first pages so regularly, warning old Andy Mellon, the Pittsburgh Belshazzar, of the wrath to come, and getting their noses bloodied in the Bible Belt. If these troubled young men had lived in 1743 they would have joined John Wesley as eagerly as they now join Stalin and company; if they had lived a century later they would have been pearls and rubies of the Oxford Movement. For in all such minds, whatever the actual object of their hysterical devotion, there is the same deep craving for a rock and a refuge, the same hot yen to escape this "sorry scheme of things entire." Reality affrights them. Science is their natural enemy, and they never cease to revile it. What they need above all things is an arcanum to reassure them, a hand to guide them, a priest in front of them to tell them in solemn, soothing tones that black will presently turn into white, that the corruptible will inevitably put on incorruption, that there is pie in the sky—or in Russia, or somewhere else far away. They are operated by faith alone, as a motor-car is operated by gasoline or a dry Congressman by bootleg gin.

To men of this kidney the appearance of "The Origin of Species" in 1859, followed by "The Descent of Man" in 1871, was a cruel blow. Before Darwin's time there was always Christianity, but afterward it was too disreputable intellectually, at least in its Anglo-Saxon forms, to give them any comfort. They could not embrace it save at the cost of becoming downright comic, and that was too much for them. So they passed into a period of *Sturm und Drang* and are just getting out of it. Some of them, made desperate by the need within, sought escape in poetry, mainly bad—which is to say, in religion purged of authority, in faith without church or creed. Others, bothered also by their hormones, rushed off to Paris or some other such Gomorrah, and there tried to find forgetfulness in alcohol and venery. Yet others, as the bitter years rolled on, discovered relief if not cure in Liberalism, parlor Socialism, the Single Tax, Rotarianism, the New Humanism, the Boy Scout movement, and other such non-Euclidian theologies. Finally, there were bold spirits, tortured beyond endurance, who shut their eyes tightly, heaved Darwin into the fire, and leaped into the arms of the Roman Jezebel, or, as in the sad case of Ludwig Lewisohn, upon the Sinus Abrahæ. But the majority kept on sweating. They yearned with a great yearning for a secure and well-furnished sanctuary, but there seemed to be none open. Their agonies, as everyone knows, made a considerable noise in the world, and produced some very pretty writing.

The invention of Communism, a sort

of *reductio ad absurdum* of Socialism, was a godsend to these unhappy spirits. At one crack they had precisely what they had longed for all the while: a new religion that did not collide with Darwinism, and was yet magnificently consoling—and preposterous. Like all other really satisfying religions it came from afar, and was thus strange, rococo and romantic. Had it been hatched in Arkansas even Greenwich Village would have hooted it, but it arrived with exotic Russian spangles upon it, and to the tune of lascivious music by Peter Ilyitch Tschaikovsky. Its ideology was inordinately convincing to the believing mind. Its cure for chickenpox was a massive dose of smallpox. It fed the hungry by cutting down their rations. It promised a Ford to every true believer, and ran up gigantic factories to make them, and then let the factories rust. It opened grandiose railroads, and then forgot to grease the axles of the rolling stock. It brought in liberty for all by making slaves of all. Not since the Seventh Century had a new religion of greater imbecility and hence greater charm been unloosed upon the world. It reduced the whole of Protestantism to the flabby level of trigonometry. As religions go it was almost perfect, for it promised everything without delivering anything.

Moreover, there was steam behind it: it had force, authority, bellicosity, moral enterprise. It did not carry on its propaganda in the banal manner of Methodists gurgling at a revival; it had a sword in its hand, and knew the smell of blood. Over in its Holy Land its grand goblins and imperial wizards rammed it into the poor Russian *muzhiks* in a manner worthy of the Spanish Dominicans of the Thirteenth Century. A whole horde of hangmen labored with heretics; even the loftiest personage, if he allowed a doubt to bemuse him, had to flee between days, like an intellectual detected in Kentucky. Thus the new religion made a double appeal, first to the will to believe and then to the will to power. The convert not only saw a mirage of a wholly modern New Jerusalem, with shoe factories operated by a reformed Holy Spirit and transcendental Little Theatres open day and night; he also saw himself as a very puissant figure in it, with passes on all the railroads, a publisher bound on penalty of death to print everything he cared to write, a comfortable cabin on what used to be J. Pierpont Morgan's yacht, and the run of the girls. No wonder so many debamboozled Liberals and other such bedevilled spirits stepped up to the box-office! The gates of Zion had opened at last! Here was a religion with a real kick in it!

Well, let us not laugh too loudly or too long. The spectacle has its humors, but so has every other performance of *Homo sapiens*, that most melancholy of clowns. The will to believe, alas, is not confined to Young Intellectuals *geb.* Presbyterians, though they may suffer from it more than most. All of us are touched with it to some extent, for all of us are the descendants of very recent persons who believed faithfully that hydrophobia could be cured by prayer, that Eve was fashioned from Adam's rib, and that Jonah swallowed the whale. Let us not expect such habits of mind to yield too easily to better ones. It will take long years and much agony to breed them out of the race. We are all, in our several ways, religious still. We all believe more or less, some boldly and some blushfully, in things that are palpably not true. The concept of the inexplicable continues to baffle most of us, and so does the concept of the irremediable. Almost unanimously we tend to believe, with a sort of inescapable fatuity, that whatever seems to

need curing can certainly be cured—if not tomorrow, then next week or next year. Our whole thinking, whether we be metaphysicians or bootleggers, is based upon this assumption that there is an answer to every riddle, a balm for every wound, and surcease for every sorrow. And if, by some accident of heredity or environment, we are beyond believing that Stalin or Mussolini or some other such sorry mountebank has every such answer, balm and surcease in his hand, then we are yet usually foolish enough to damn poor Hoover for not producing them.

At bottom, this universal human impulse to embrace the illogical is probably no more than a sign of an underlying yearning for the logical. We find the world intolerable, and hence try to refashion it in a more rational manner. Superficially, of course, such things as Communism seem to be merely silly; they are as little supported by the known facts as astrology, say, or spiritualism. But under them there is a plain reaching out for order and design. Even orthodox religion, once a few postulates are accepted, becomes magnificently logical; the theologians, in truth, are the most accomplished of logicians. I have frequently argued in this place that if Christianity be true at all then there is no conceivable answer to the case of the Fundamentalists. In the same way, if it be true at all that the human race is capable, by pure reason, of devising an ideal government, then certainly the Bolsheviki deserve to be heard politely, for they are the first wizards since 1776 to attempt it. But I doubt very seriously that it is true. The problem of government seems to me to be inherently and incurably insoluble, just as the problem of evil is insoluble. One has sufficiently convicted any man of quackery, I suspect, when one shows that he says he can solve it.

Wisdom Up to Date

THE ENCYCLOPEDIA AMERICANA. *Edited by A. H. McDannald.* $120. 10 x 5½; 30 vols., 22,500 pp. New York: *The Americana Corporation.*

THE Encyclopedia Americana, in its present form, first appeared in 1918. It was revised in 1920, 1922, 1924, 1927, 1929 and 1931, and the present revision brings it down to the current year. It thus offers serious competition to the Encyclopedia Britannica, the fourteenth edition of which came out in 1929, and to the New International, the second and last edition of which was completed in 1916, and the latest supplement to which stops with 1930, too soon to include the census returns of that year. The Americana gives those returns at all appropriate places, and is rich in other new stuff, not to be found in any similar work. The article on J. Ramsay MacDonald, for example, comes down to his betrayal of the Labor party and the beginning of his administration as a Coalition Prime Minister, and the articles on Thomas A. Edison, Dwight W. Morrow and Arthur Schnitzler record their deaths, though all died so recently as last October. These revisions have been made very skillfully, and without resetting the work. In the same way space has been made, always without any apparent damage to the standing text, for notices of men and women who have lately come into the public eye, and for events of the last few years.

The Britannica, as everyone knows, runs to long articles, and the New International to short ones. It was the idea of the late Daniel Coit Gilman, who planned the latter, that it should offer as many different subject headings as possible, to save the reader the trouble of searching for what he wanted in general articles. He carried this division and sub-division very far, and